

Bob Dylan: "Reaching back for Yesterday."

by Peter Stone Brown

In the past five months, Bob Dylan has released 39 discs of music, which is more than his studio albums combined, not counting the *Bootleg Series* and other compilations. Last November, Dylan released the 36 disc *Live 1966 Recordings* a rather astounding document of his world tour that year. It was a very good way to temporarily escape from the election results three days before its release. March 31st marks the release of *Triplicate*, Dylan's third album of American standards which also is a three disc set.

Dylan kept his fans waiting for more than 30 years for a live 1966 show with the lone exception of an incredible version of "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" recorded in Liverpool that was the B-side of "I Want You." A few years later a mislabeled bootleg of the Manchester concert that year wrongly thought to be one of the London Royal Albert Hall concerts appeared. Over the years other concerts or parts of concerts surfaced.

Backing Dylan, then known as The Hawks, was the group that later would become The Band, minus drummer Levon Helm, who quit the tour late the previous year, Robbie Robertson, guitar, Rick Danko, bass, Richard Manuel, piano, and Garth Hudson on organ. Playing drums was Mickey Jones, who was working with Johnny Rivers and before that Trini Lopez. At that point in time the group was steeped in R&B, blues and rockabilly. An early indication of the sound they would achieve with Dylan blues singer John Hammond Jr's *So Many Roads* recorded in 1964.

The shows were what Dylan's management referred to as half and half, the first set, Dylan solo on acoustic, the second set electric. The set list was the same every night with the exception of an occasional "Positively Fourth Street." The recordings for the most part are sound boards recorded by Richard Alderson, a sound engineer who built the system used on the tour. The London shows, Manchester, and parts of others were recorded by Columbia Records. One of the interesting things is noting the adjustments Alderson would make each night, some to accommodate whatever hall they were performing in, and others based on listening to the previous shows. Sometimes these adjustments take place during the show and mid-song. So on some shows Manuel's piano stands out more than others, or Danko's bass is at the forefront. Not all the shows are complete, and there are a few songs that are incomplete, which gets a bit frustrating if you forget to look at the cover of the disc, and you're thinking this is the greatest "Desolation Row" or "Visions Of Johanna" ever and all of a sudden it ends.

So why would someone want 36 shows of the same songs? The easy answer, in addition to the fact that these are some of Dylan's all-time greatest performances of what well may be his greatest songs is that none

of the shows are the same especially in terms of feel. Some, especially the acoustic performances may be close, but there's always something different. For all of Dylan's supposed indifference to the audience, each night during the acoustic set where there was no booing or shouting, you can feel him gauging the audience trying to see how they'll react to what is to come. Both sets featured brand new songs from then then unreleased *Blonde On Blonde*, "Fourth Time Around," "Visions Of Johanna" and "Just Like A Woman" on the first set and "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat" on the second set. As a whole, the concerts featured songs from all of Dylan's previous albums except for *Freewheelin'*. Three of those songs, a rewritten "Baby Let Me Follow You Down," "One Too Many Mornings" and "I Don't Believe You" were dramatically rocked up.

The vocals on the acoustic sets are often incredibly gentle punctuated by intense out there harmonica solos that go to another planet, especially on "Desolation Row" and "Mr. Tambourine Man." One the best of these is the Sheffield show where the "Tambourine Man" harp solo was featured in Dylan's rarely seen film, *Eat The Document*.

Each night the electric sets were a battle, particularly in England, where the cat calls and boos and slow claps seemed in increase on each stop of the tour, with Newcastle being one of the more contentious audiences. The response of Dylan and his band was to play louder and harder, with Dylan's onstage comments becoming increasingly sarcastic. For the most part, he saved his anger for the songs, especially "Ballad Of A Thin Man," where snarls out the lines in a manner that is deliciously vicious, often changing lines: "You know something is happening and it's happening to you, isn't it Mr. Jones?"

As for the music, Robbie Robertson and Garth Hudson never take the same solo twice! Sometimes they hit it more than others though on each version of "Thin Man," Hudson is never less than astounding, sometimes changing the sound of his organ entirely as he snakes around Dylan's lines and both Robertson and Hudson use their instruments to answer Dylan's lyrics.

On a technical note, Alderson's soundboards sound just as good if not better than the recordings the Columbia engineers did.

As Al Kooper told me in 1994 when I interviewed him in anticipation of the original *Live 66 Bootleg Series*, "What's really interesting is they're putting out the stuff from England from the '66 tour with the Hawks, and that's some of the greatest rock and roll ever made in the history of rock and roll and that will vindicate probably Dylan to this generation that has no idea why people think he's great. It's scary how good that stuff is."

51 years later and the same guy is still doing what he wants to, often to the consternation of his fans, exploring songs that were all recorded by Frank Sinatra. Many of the songs were also done by other singers, but the arrangements are based on Sinatra's.

Once again Dylan is using his band, minus guitarist Stu Kimball with the addition of session guitarist Dean Parks. There are more horns this time around, arranged and conducted by James Harper. The album was recorded live in the studio.

Each disc starts with an upbeat swinging number, though the majority of songs are slower ballads of longing and regret. The upbeat numbers are often fun, especially "Braggin'" (which reminds me of Bobby Darin, though he apparently never did it) and "The Best Is Yet To Come." "Braggin'" also has the funkier guitar solo on the entire set.

Instrumentally it's fine, though on some of the slower ballads the arrangements and mood are at times too similar to the earlier releases, *Shadows Of The Night* and *Fallen Angels*.

The album is packaged like an old 78 rpm album, and each disc contains ten songs like early LPs, and in fact most country albums until Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, and Willie Nelson came along. For why three discs and ten songs, check out the interview by one-time *Musician* magazine editor Bill Flanagan on Dylan's web site:

<http://www.bobdylan.com/news/qa-with-bill-flanagan/>

I think Dylan genuinely likes these songs. They are what he grew up on, but there are several times on these recordings that you can tell he is getting off on the word play of the lyrics. Also some of the sentiments in these songs may express as he once wrote in one of his innumerable rewrites of "Tangled Up In Blue," "...the things I never learned to say."

A musician friend of mine named Mike Hansen has a different theory: "I feel like he is genuinely re-animating some of America's greatest treasures. I think he knows he killed the whole art form and I think these 50 songs are some kind of penance. But they are also a sort of proposal. Nothing has to sound like it did before, nothing, not his songs or anyone else's. Keys and tempos, the mood, the instrumentation, everything changed to suit the singer. I'm really proud of him!"

On one level, Dylan has always been in his own way part teacher. He's pretty much explored every genre of American music from traditional folk to rock and roll, blues, country and jazz. He knows that by simply performing or recording a song, a good portion of his audience is going to check out

where it came from. I also think that Dylan knows in order to stay alive, he needs to keep challenging himself. These songs melodically and structurally are not the ballads and blues he sang for most of his life. Melodically, they are far more intricate.

For the most part he succeeds. The best of these songs have a way of coming back into your mind hours after you heard them. For me the standout is "Once Upon A Time," but it's followed closely by "As Time Goes By," "September Of My Years," "Sentimental Journey," and "It's Funny To Everyone But Me."